

# Scum

Lola Cawsey

**Abstract:** “Scum” is the personal narrative of first-generation scholar Lola Cawsey, a first-year undergraduate student at Durham University. As the narrative unfolds, she creates a comparison between the life she led before starting university and the challenging situations she has overcome in an elitist, exclusive environment where her identity as a first-generation scholar often places her as the recipient of others’ criticisms. The word “scum” comes to embody Lola’s struggles and doubts, but also inspires her drive for change and her advocacy of the power of first-generation scholars.

Am I scum?

This is not a debate I imagined having at university in the summer months before I started my first term, but it is one I have come up against on several occasions. Scum is not a word I had envisaged being used to categorise certain students, but it has been used to exclude and belittle me. This is not a question I should have internalised, but sometimes it is all I can think about, an immovable question mark lingering in my mind.

Am I scum?

Perhaps it would be useful to provide some context. I am a first-generation scholar, and, for me, this means that my parents did not attend university. This is a part of my identity I never reckoned with until its ramifications smacked me with full force in my first few weeks at Durham University. This is a part of my life I felt completely passive about. I am fiercely proud of my parents; they are compassionate, exuberant people. When I received my acceptance to Durham, they were as thrilled and delighted as I was, and in no way did the fact that my life was beginning to take a different trajectory deter them from any feelings of pride and joy.

However, as I entered my college, the beautiful Durham Castle, I was struck by the newness of everything. The towering portraits of academics loomed over me as I tried to acclimatise myself with the longstanding traditions, the rituals, the elitist language, the heavy gowns, the privilege, the formal dinners, and the extravagant balls. To say it was—and still is—overwhelming would be a severe understatement. However, a part of me was intrigued and enthused by this brand new environment. After all, our world is a rich tapestry of cultures and people; opening a door into this corner of the tapestry was too good to resist, an incredible opportunity.

Sometimes I wonder if this door is painted gold on the front to distract from the problems waiting behind, ready to pounce, ready to wrap themselves around you like a venomous snake taking control of its prey.

On my first night at university, I was abruptly informed that first-generation scholars, particularly ones like me who attended a state-funded comprehensive school, should not be students at elite universities—the first knife in my back. When I enquired as to why my fellow student felt it necessary to not only take that position, but to share it with me, they simply responded that I do not have the educational or cultural background to understand the workings of prestigious institutions. The knife twisted.

In a way, this student is correct. My educational experience prior to Durham is far removed from the innerworkings of this university. At my secondary school, we did not have a High Table where the staff sat to enjoy their three-course meals. We also did not have Matriculation, a celebration to welcome the new students, most of whom (unlike me) looked content and self-assured in their gowns and black tie dress. I did not talk amongst my friends of second homes and my parents' connections to various highflyers with top jobs. Instead, my school was a diverse and interesting place full of differing opinions and perspectives, brimming with both the ordinary and the extraordinary. With my friends, we chatted about the things that mattered to us: our future plans, our favourite books, our funny memories from the summer.

The eighteen years I spent at home before leaving for Durham were idyllic, another statement which seems to surprise other students who cannot fathom that a humbler upbringing could make someone so content and feel so lucky. I have always been loved and respected by my parents; they have always encouraged my dreams. They have made it possible for me to embrace opportunities that were not available to them. But I have been reminded repeatedly during my time at Durham that my childhood was subpar. For some, it is vital to inform me that my parents did not provide me with a "good education," an acid-laced response which is common when I mention I attended a state-funded comprehensive school. Others are merely shocked that I had a Saturday job whilst I did my A Levels. Some question why, when I go on holiday, I stay in hotels, simply assuming that my family owns a second home abroad. Many have expressed embarrassment that my parents did not attend university, asking me to justify what they did with their lives and how they are able to work.

Despite others' perceptions, I feel indescribably grateful to have had my childhood experiences. Every night, I had dinner with my family around a table where they listened to me babble on about whatever I liked. This may sound like such a simple thing, but it is a luxury to be heard by those whose opinions matter to you. Amongst the many gifts bestowed upon me by my parents, most crucially, they always assured me that I am important and intelligent, and that others' words will never have the power to change this. This is the life I have led, and it has made me very happy.

Just because my life does not resemble the lives of some other students at Durham, I do not for one second believe that I do not deserve my place. Just like everyone else fortunate enough to be here—because education is a privilege—I have worked hard and persevered. But this simple fact is not enough for some.

For other students, no matter what I do, I am marred and tainted because of my status and identity as a first-generation scholar. This resistance has manifested itself in brutish words, social rejection, and sly actions. I have been instructed to lie to others about my parents' occupations and educational backgrounds in order to avoid ignominy. I have been praised for breaking a curse, for rising above my family and bettering myself, all said with an encouraging smile, making this twisted compliment feel like an even deeper stab. I have been reminded that I am lucky to have been given a place at a top university, that opportunities do not appear for people like me very often. I have been reprimanded for taking the place of a private school student who deserves a place more than I do. I have been stopped three times upon entering my college and asked to show identification as, allegedly, I do not look like a typical Durham student. I have been shouted down in a seminar after I questioned why state school and first-generation students are massively underrepresented at Durham, and swiftly notified that we are lazy and simply do not work as hard. I have been callously told that if I cannot afford to pay for my university education out of my own pocket then I should not be here. I have been enlightened to the fact

that my name is rough and common, and it might be helpful for me to change it if I want to get by socially. I have been quizzed as to which socioeconomic group I identify with because I do not sound working-class, but I act it. I have been ignored by a professor who assured me that Durham is an inclusive place when I tried to raise my voice about the belittling and undermining statements made to me by another student in their class. I have been called scum.

Am I scum?

No, I am not scum. I never have been, and I never will be.

In life, there is always the good, the bad, and the ugly. Whilst my experiences as a first-generation scholar have not always empowered me, I have been fortunate enough to meet other first-generation scholars who have shown me that I am valuable and that my words are powerful. Becoming a part of the First Generation Scholars' Network has proved integral to my strength in the face of adversity from others. With my first-generation friends, I have both laughed and raged at the comments I have received. I consider myself incredibly lucky to know people who care so much about improving the first-generation experience that they spend their free time developing remarkable research projects into what needs to be done. It is immensely reassuring to have met professors who are doing everything they can to raise staff awareness of this issue. I am so proud of all of us.

Something about Durham that makes me feel elated is the fact that it is overflowing with people who genuinely care about changing this university so that experiences of exclusion cease to exist. For me, the individual who stands out in this regard is the principal of my college. She is simply amazing. When I spent some time with her, scheduled with the purpose of talking about my thoughts and experiences as a first-generation scholar, she could not have been more supportive and understanding. She is someone who not only talks—she acts. Her love for Durham is matched by her recognition that (like most things in life) it is not without its faults. She has my complete admiration.

However, as hard as I try to fight against others' cruel words and to remember all the good that Durham offers, often I am left with a pervading feeling of doubt. For me, doubt is this dominant grey cloud which lingers over my head sometimes. Occasionally I feel as if I am waiting for the rain to pour or the thunder to strike, whether that be a hurtful comment or a dismissal of my opinion, a social rejection or a sideways glance. However, the praise I have received motivates me to persist when some people have felt it necessary to tear me down. I am not sure that I will ever fully destroy doubt (the giant, vociferous monster that it is), but I know that I will always have the kind words at the back of my mind ready to greet me when doubt overshadows again.

Despite doubt becoming an unwelcome companion of mine, it is of paramount importance to remember that the contrast between my positive and negative experiences proves that there is always light in the dark. I will always choose to embrace life rather than shy away from it, despite any shadows that may lie in wait, because the brightness of the sun will always warm me.

I am not scum.

First-generation scholars are not scum. We are insightful, meritorious, resourceful, intelligent, creative, empathetic, and determined people. We endeavour and we persevere, and we achieve highly. We have something important to offer. We can provide a fresh and unique perspective regarding university life, from the social to the financial, from the academic to the everyday. We can start initiatives, create networks, provide support, highlight issues, praise the positive. We can shift archaic and redundant attitudes, particularly that higher and further education is for the privately-educated, middle-class student who comes from a long line of educated family members. We can add to the richness of university life and culture.

I do feel that the tides of change are slowly starting to lap the shores of ignorance. I do strongly believe that more and more people are becoming aware that being a first-generation scholar in a prestigious institution is not easy, but so worthwhile for both the scholar and the wider university community. There is still much to be done; I am not deluded in thinking that this will be a simple, overnight change. But change is happening. The light of first-generation scholars is burning brightly—a light so fierce that the word scum has no presence in its aura.

First-generation scholars cannot be shouted down or disregarded. Our voices will be heard because we will not have it any other way. And this is what makes me so very happy and proud to be a first-generation scholar.